Translated excerpt

Wolfgang Bauer
Die geraubten Mädchen – Boko Haram und der Terror im Herzen Afrikas
Fotos von Andy Spyra

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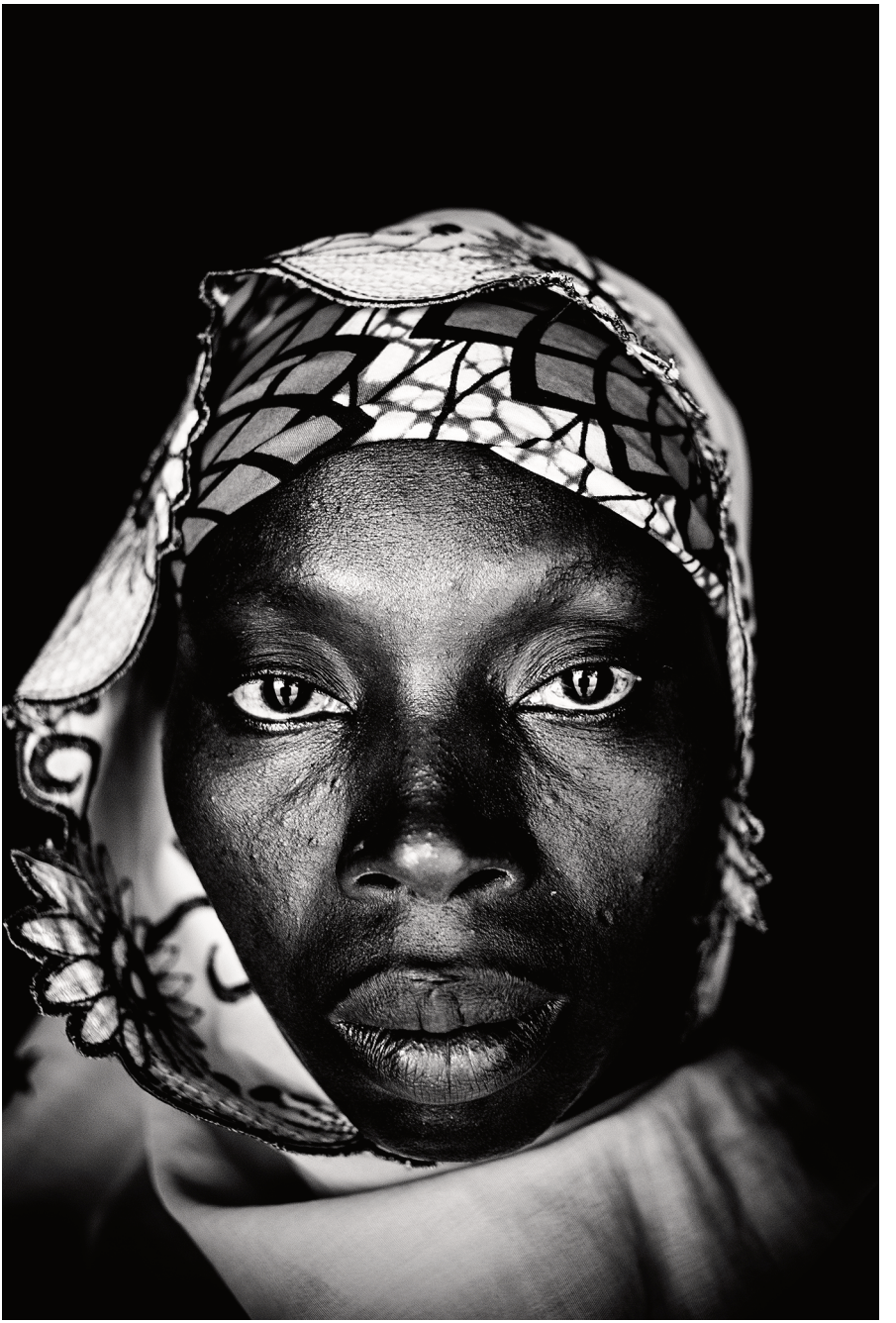
Stolen Girls - Survivors of Boko Haram Tell Their Story
Photos by Andy Spyra

Translated by Eric Frederick Trump

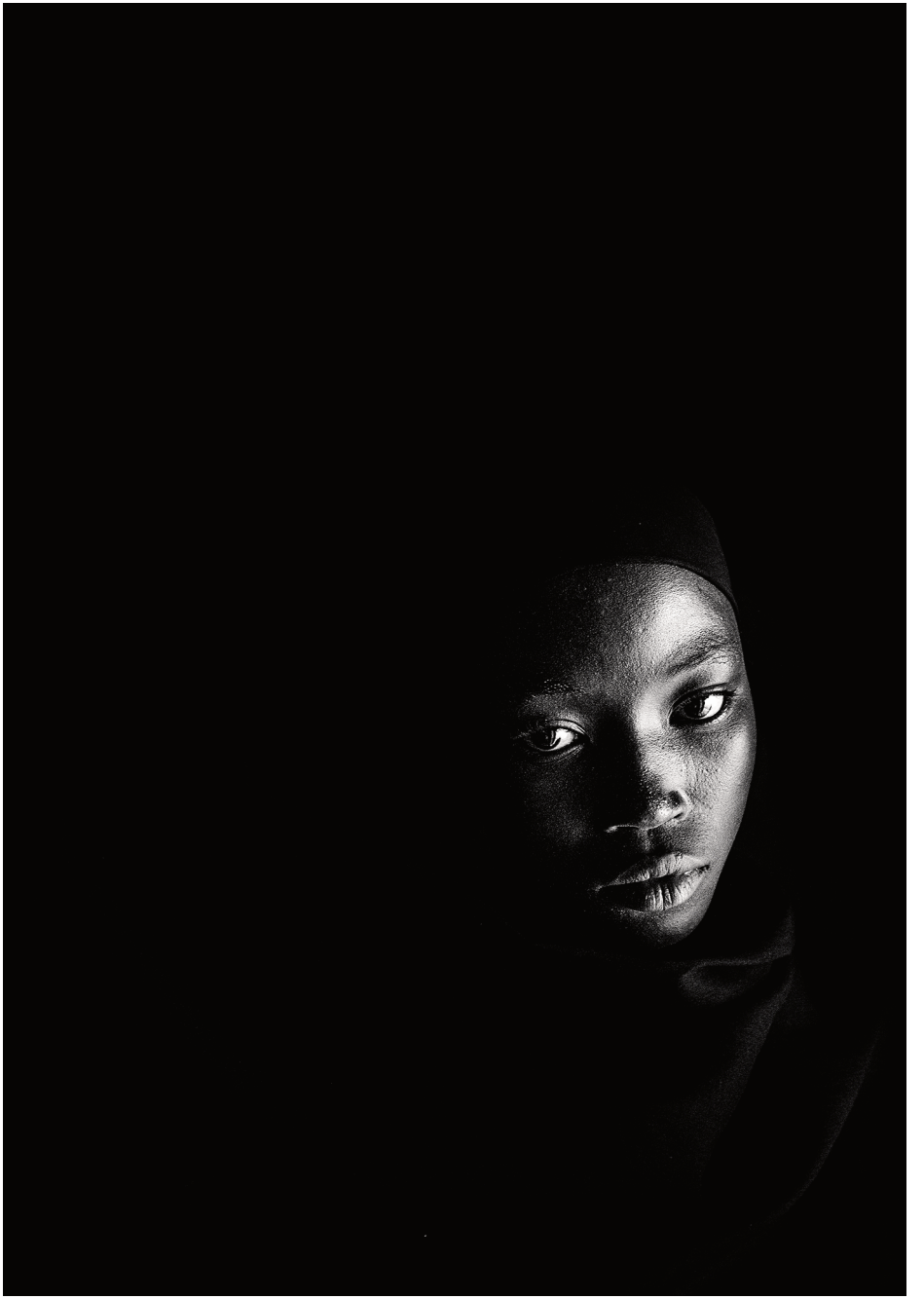
The forest that became the symbol of terror in Nigeria is dark and nearly impenetrable. Those who enter never find their way out again. It is said an ancient curse lies upon it. The forest is so old that no one can say anymore what its name originally meant. The Sambisa Forest is the last of its kind. Of all the great forests in northeastern Nigeria only the Sambisa has remained. Its trees do not inspire awe; they are only a few meters high, gnarled and intertwined. The underbrush is full of thorns as sharp as claws. The forest's canopy blocks the sky. The sun rarely filters down to its most interior spaces. The ground here does not offer a firm footing. Great rivers, with sources in the Mandara Mountains, flow not to the sea, but to the Sambisa's swamps. Many predators inhabit the forest. The most dangerous of these are human beings. More precisely: men.

The highway that skirts the Sambisa is officially called A13. Gray craggy rock pillars tower over it, the remains of ancient volcanoes. The highway initially brought progress to northeastern Nigeria. It was finished at the beginning of the 1980s and was the first road to open the region to modern commerce. Its two lanes unspool from Yola, in east Nigeria, heading over 350 kilometers north, to near Bama in the northeast. Its asphalt seems to attract people irresistibly, like iron filings to a magnet. Villages, brick houses, and round mud huts crowd along the highway's route. In the past few years, settlements along it have grown ever bigger. They are called Michika, Duhu, Gulak, and Gubla. The road has until recently been a gateway for new ideas. It brought doctors, medicines, and teachers to the people living along its route. Now this same road brings them suffering and sorrow.

Sadiya, 38, market woman, mother of five, was held hostage by Boko Haram for nine months in the Sambisa Forest. She was forced to marry and, at the time of the interview, was expecting a child from the man who tormented her.



Talatu, 14, Sadiya's daughter, was in the ninth grade at the time of her abduction. She was abducted with her mother and was also forced to marry.



THE FOREST

Talatu: My name is Jummai, but everyone calls me Talatu because I was born first. Before they carried me off into the forest, I was in the high school in Duhu, in the ninth grade. My favorite subject is math. I like math because it's logical. Once you've understood the logic of a mathematical rule, you can solve every task easily and quickly.

Hidden in the swamps of the Sambisa Forest are the headquarters of terrorists who in their cruelty seem almost without comparison. They are as modern as they are archaic. The world refers to them as "Boko Haram," meaning "Western education is forbidden." They call themselves "Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād," meaning "Group of the People of Sunnah for the Preaching of Islam and Jihad." They are fighting for the foundation of a caliphate in Nigeria, cooperating with al-Qaida in Mali and Algeria. By now, they have sworn allegiance to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. In the summer of 2014, Boko Haram occupied a fifth of Nigeria in just a few months.

Sadiya: You enter the forest, and it gets dark. So dark that you forget it's still daytime. I'm the mother of Talatu. They took us both into the forest. The driver of our truck had to turn on the headlights because suddenly it was so dark.

In the West, little notice was paid to the terror that was unfolding in Nigeria—not until what happened the night of April 14, 2014. A Boko Haram commando kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from a boarding school in the small town of Chibok. They forced them

into trucks and drove them into the forest from which, at the time of this writing, they have not escaped or been freed. With the abduction of the Chibok girls, the brutality of Boko Haram made international headlines. Suddenly prominent people such as Michelle Obama, the wife of the American president Barack Obama, demanded "Bring Back Our Girls." The attack on Chibok gave the intangible a name.

It is estimated that by now many thousands of women are captives of Boko Haram. Most are assumed to be held in the Sambisa and its swamps. African and European heads of state organized crisis summits to discuss the rescue of the girls. Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, pledged to support a West African strike force. However, the shock of Boko Haram didn't last for long. Northeastern Nigeria is far from the world's political centers of power.

In July 2015 and then again in January 2016, I interviewed more than sixty girls and women who had managed to escape from the Boko Haram slave camps. I was accompanied by a photographer and translator. Many women with whom we spoke had just escaped the forest days before. Their narratives shed light on unimaginable crimes and gave a glimpse into the inner workings of a terrorist organization that in the past few years has killed even more people than ISIS. As deadly as Boko Haram is, very little is known about it. It is unclear how it is administered, what its long-term goals are, who finances it, and how it comes to some of its decisions. The interviews with these women do not answer these questions, but they do help us to come a little closer to answering them. Their stories represent not just sources of information about Boko Haram. They are also testimonies about the women. They take us into their lives, which, despite the Internet and the effects of globalization, remain alien to us. They take us along the alleys of villages whose names we often cannot pronounce and that are marked on only a few maps. Their stories are painful, in part because they show us how limited our own perspectives still

are, how straitened our awareness, and how meager our understanding of the world and the era that we call "our own."

In seemingly distant Europe and America, the catastrophe that is Boko Haram has not affected us directly so far. Most observers of the situation, however, agree that this group will one day carry out attacks in the West.

We cannot ignore Boko Haram's terror. If we refuse to look at the blood spilled by others, we will soon be looking at our own blood. We can begin to confront these terrorists successfully only when we listen to their victims: the women.

Sadiya: They left me only my name. They took everything else. I am now someone else. I feel that. I am now someone I do not know. I grew up in the village of Duhu in the state of Adamawa. Most of the people there are Christians, but we are Muslims. I never went to school. I had to work the fields with my mother. My father was a mason and was always on the go. When he was home, my parents argued all the time. They eventually got divorced. Then I lived with my mother.

I was happier as a child than I am today. I wanted for nothing. I miss those easy days. I was married at sixteen. He was eighteen, very handsome (*she laughs and looks at the ground*). He always played jokes. He was a truck driver and employed at a transport firm in Maiduguri, the capital of the state of Borno. He was in Duhu when his truck had a flat tire. That is how we met. I was standing with friends at a well when he came up to me. "I have never seen you here!" he said to me, smiling. That's how it started. We were married twelve years. We moved to Maiduguri and lived on the company grounds of the transport firm. We leased a small store. I sold soap, Maggi bouillon cubes, and ketchup. I hired two girls to work as sales assistants. We made a good life for ourselves. He traveled throughout the whole country, all the way to Port Harcourt in the South. Then his truck ended up in a river and he died. That was seven years ago.

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The room where we meet thirty-eight-year-old Sadiya and her fourteen-year-old daughter Talatu for the first time is in a small residential building in central Yola, the capital of the Nigerian state of Adamawa. It is mid-July 2015. Both mother and daughter were abducted from their village at the end of August 2014. In June 2015, they fled their captors. We are lying on a rug because Sadiya and Talatu are uncomfortable on the sofas and chairs in the room. Where they come from, only dignitaries sit in chairs. The windows are covered with dark cloth. Outside it is brutally hot.

Yola is the last safe outpost before Boko Haram's influence begins. About 340,000 people are said to have lived here in 2010. Yola sprawls out into the surrounding lands, new neighborhoods growing like shrub and grassland. Desperate fugitives come here seeking sanctuary and stability. The encroachment of Boko Haram transformed Yola into a city of more than a million within a few months. From the air, Yola looks provincial. The houses are low to the ground, many still made of brick earth, usually one story, with corrugated tin roofs of blue, red, and yellow. Situated among the houses are open areas where the big markets set up. These are the targets time and again of bombings. High walls surround the university and administrative buildings. Only the main transportation axes are asphalted. Dust covers everything. Dust is on the yellow, three-wheeled motorbikes that are the inexpensive means of transport for most people. It covers the fleet of used European automobiles that plague the city streets.

A few hundred kilometers to the north is where the Sahel—the semi-arid southern border of the Sahara Desert—begins. This region often sends its sandstorms over Yola. When that happens, the Saharan sands darken the sun and taint the air, first a gleaming yellow, then orange, then a dim brown. The sky seems to drape itself over the city. Houses are hurriedly built, wall to wall, and are rarely ever finished because people have usually already moved in when the buildings are just bare masonry and carpentry. People exploit the refugees. The rents are exorbitant. More

and more prostitutes are found in this city, where there are many churches and even more mosques. Refugees fill just about every free space between houses, every seam. Whoever can't cling to an existence in Yola—in one of the large encampments or in the house of a friend—because money runs out is forced to return to live in one of the outlying villages. Where terror still reigns. The women and girls with whom we speak come from these villages.

They have returned from a world that journalists are not able to enter. We speak over the course of two days with mother and daughter, both self-assured women. Both were kidnapped by Boko Haram. Sadiya is six months pregnant. Her belly bulges noticeably. The father of the child she carries is the man who raped her. Sadiya is tall, haggard, and fragile. Her voice is deep and raw. When she tells her story, she seems to look enraptured. Her eyes often have no expression. It is Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Sadiya is a disciplined observer of the holy month, drinking nothing, praying at the prescribed times. Talatu is not. As if she is trying to provoke her mother, she drinks long and pleasurably, her mother looking away, seemingly hurt by her daughter's behavior.

Confidential intermediaries arranged our meetings with the women. After their escape from Boko Haram, they returned to their villages. Most of the women with whom we speak are Margi, a small tribe of 250,000 people. We have changed their names in order to protect them, and every day we changed the location where we met them for even in Yola Boko Haram kidnaps ever more people. The most recent attack, on a market, killed forty-five people, just two weeks before our arrival.

When we first meet the women there is much mistrust. We are afraid of them because Boko Haram has been known to force kidnapped girls to become suicide bombers. Almost daily, young women carry out suicide attacks in busy places, most because they were forced to do so. However, others do it out of conviction. Who can measure how much someone will change during a

months-long imprisonment, how much the psyche has to adjust to survive? And of course the women we meet are afraid of us because at first they cannot tell if we are for or against Boko Haram. For a long time now, they have inhabited a world dominated by Boko Haram.

Sadiya: My husband was called Moussa. After his accident in the truck, he was taken to the hospital, a friend told me. But that's where he died, and I had to give up the store. The store alone did not feed us. We needed his salary. I took inventory of what was left in the store and returned to Duhu. My husband and I had given the store a special name, but I have forgotten it. Strange, isn't it? I have forgotten the name.

She concentrates and tries to think of the name for a while, falling quiet. Then she shakes her head.

Sadiya: But what was I supposed to do? With all my children . . . I did not know for a long time. I asked the two girls, whom I had hired, to stay in the store until all the goods were sold. They sent the money to me in Duhu. After five months, everything had been sold. I was desperate. I had never gone to school and had not worked the land since my marriage. I tried it again, but it was too difficult for me. My back, it quickly began to hurt, and I had to stop. When you do that kind of work from an early age, your body gets used to it. But I wasn't used to it anymore. So I started cooking kosai, bean cakes fried in palm oil. I obtained a permit from the village chief and set up a stand at the bus stop.

She coughs and spits white froth. Her chest burns. She has a headache. She continually puts a hand to her forehead.

Sadiya: Talatu and I were a team at the kosai stand. She packed the kosai cakes into plastic bags for customers and took their